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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 February 2016]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Western Sahara - time to resolve status

In 1963, the Western Sahara, then the colony Spanish Sahara, was included in the list prepared by the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.1 Three years later, the General Assembly passed a resolution which invited "the administering Power to determine at the earliest possible date, in conformity with the aspirations of the indigenous people of Spanish Sahara, (...) the procedures for the holding of a referendum under United Nations auspices."2

On 31st October 1975 Morocco and Mauritania invaded the Western Sahara, driving the native Sahrawi people from their homes by force, including the use of napalm.3. On 26th February of the following year, Spain, the former colonist and the recognised Administering Power, informed the Secretary-General that it had terminated its presence in the territory and renounced any international responsibility for its administration. Morocco annexed the northern two-thirds of the territory; and in 1979 added the part previously occupied by Mauretania. However the annexation has not been internationally recognised and Morocco therefore does not enjoy the legal status of Administering Power.

In 1991, the United Nations brokered a ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of the Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro) liberation movement and agreed to organise a referendum in which the Sahrawi people could vote on the future of Western Sahara. Because of disputes about eligibility to vote, this referendum has never taken place.

Of the territories on the 1963 list, only the Western Sahara is still not self-governing. Is it the last colony in Africa?

The International Fellowship of Reconciliation calls upon all involved parties to expedite the holding of a referendum which will enable the Sahrawi people to decide the future of their homeland.